

§ 97-90. Legal and medical fees to be approved by Commission; misdemeanor to receive fees unapproved by Commission, or to solicit employment in adjusting claims; agreement for fee or compensation.

(a) Fees for attorneys and charges of health care providers for medical compensation under this Article shall be subject to the approval of the Commission; but no physician or hospital or other medical facilities shall be entitled to collect fees from an employer or insurance carrier until he has made the reports required by the Commission in connection with the case. Except as provided in G.S. 97-26(g), a request for a specific prior approval to charge shall be submitted to the Commission for each such fee or charge.

(b) Any person (i) who receives any fee, other consideration, or any gratuity on account of services so rendered, unless such consideration or gratuity is approved by the Commission or the court, as provided in subsection (c), or (ii) who makes it a business to solicit employment for a lawyer or for himself in respect of any claim or award for compensation, shall be guilty of a Class 1 misdemeanor.

(c) If an attorney has an agreement for fee or compensation under this Article, he shall file a copy or memorandum thereof with the hearing officer or Commission prior to the conclusion of the hearing. If the agreement is not considered unreasonable, the hearing officer or Commission shall approve it at the time of rendering decision. If the agreement is found to be unreasonable by the hearing officer or Commission, the reasons therefor shall be given and what is considered to be reasonable fee allowed. If within five days after receipt of notice of such fee allowance, the attorney shall file notice of appeal to the full Commission, the full Commission shall hear the matter and determine whether or not the attorney's agreement as to a fee or the fee allowed is unreasonable. If the full Commission is of the opinion that such agreement or fee allowance is unreasonable and so finds, then the attorney may, by filing written notice of appeal within 10 days after receipt of such action by the full Commission, appeal to the senior resident judge of the superior court in the county in which the cause of action arose or in which the claimant resides; and upon such appeal said judge shall consider the matter and determine in his discretion the reasonableness of said agreement or fix the fee and direct an order to the Commission following his determination therein. The Commission shall, within 20 days after receipt of notice of appeal from its action concerning said agreement or allowance, transmit its findings and reasons as to its action concerning such agreement or allowance to the judge of the superior court designated in the notice of appeal. In all other cases where there is no agreement for fee or compensation, the attorney or claimant may, by filing written notice of appeal within five days after receipt of notice of action of the full Commission with respect to attorneys' fees, appeal to the senior resident judge of the superior court of the district of the county in which the cause arose or in which the claimant resides; and upon such appeal said judge shall consider the matter of such fee and determine in his discretion the attorneys' fees to be allowed in the cause. The Commission shall, within 20 days after notice of appeal has been filed, transmit its findings and reasons as to its action concerning such fee or compensation to the judge of the superior court designated in the notice of appeal; provided that the Commission shall in no event have any jurisdiction over any attorneys' fees in any third-party action. In any case in which an attorney appeals to the superior court on the question of attorneys' fees, the appealing attorney shall notify the Commission and the employee of any and all proceedings before the superior court on the appeal, and either or both may appear and be represented at such proceedings.

The Commission, in determining an allowance of attorneys' fees, shall examine the record to determine the services rendered. The factors which may be considered by the Commission in allowing a reasonable fee include, but are not limited to, the time invested, the amount involved, the results achieved, whether the fee is fixed or contingent, the customary fee for

similar services, the experience and skill level of the attorney, and the nature of the attorney's services.

In making the allowance of attorneys' fees, the Commission shall, upon its own motion or that of an interested party, set forth findings sufficient to support the amount approved.

The Commission may deny or reduce an attorney's fees upon proof of solicitation of employment in violation of the Rules of Professional Conduct of the North Carolina State Bar.

(d) Provided, that nothing contained in this section shall prevent the collection of such reasonable fees of physicians and charges for hospitalization as may be recovered in an action, or embraced in settlement of a claim, against a third-party tort-feasor as described in G.S. 97-10.2.

(e) A health care provider shall not pursue a private claim against an employee for all or part of the costs of medical treatment provided to the employee by the provider unless the employee's claim or the treatment is finally adjudicated not to be compensable or the employee fails to request a hearing after denial of liability by the employer. Notwithstanding subsequent denial of liability or adjudication that the condition treated was not compensable, the insurer shall be liable as provided in G.S. 97-26 to providers whose services have been authorized by the insurer or employer. The statute of limitations applicable to a provider's claim for payment shall be tolled during the period the compensability of a claim or liability for particular treatment remains an issue in a compensation case.

(f) If a dispute arises between an employee's current and past attorney or attorneys regarding the division of a fee as approved by the Commission pursuant to this section, the Commission shall hear any dispute after the Commission has approved the settlement agreement. The Commission shall give notice to each of the employee's current and past attorneys of record of the total amount of the approved fee prior to determining how the fee shall be divided between those attorneys. An attorney who is an interested party to an action under this subsection shall have the same rights of appeal as outlined in subsection (c) of this section. (1929, c. 120, s. 64; 1955, c. 1026, s. 4; 1959, cc. 1268, 1307; 1973, c. 520, s. 4; 1981, c. 521, s. 4; 1991, c. 703, s. 6; 1993, c. 539, s. 680; 1994, Ex. Sess., c. 24, s. 14(c); 1993 (Reg. Sess., 1994), c. 679, s. 9.1; 2013-278, s. 1; 2017-124, s. 2.)